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The Geneva United Nations Charter on Sustainable Housing

Chapter 1. Challenges to sustainable housing

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe member States note that:

1. Sustainable housing has a key role in the quality of human life. The positive impact of housing can be increased through the application of principles of: environmental protection; economic effectiveness; social inclusion and participation; and cultural adequacy. The development of sustainable housing in the ECE region faces multiple challenges resulting mainly from globalization, demographic changes, climate change and the economic crisis.

2. Housing provision, management and demolition impact the environment; these processes consume resources (land, water, energy and building materials) and produce, for example, greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing this impact requires the engagement of Governments and civil society as well as action by the ECE and other international organizations. Achieving effective housing management, investing in large-scale retrofitting to improve environmental performance and developing financial mechanisms to improve access to housing should be policy priorities. The life-cycle approach in design should be promoted as one way to reduce the impact of this sector on the environment.

3. A degraded urban environment, with air and noise pollution and a lack of green spaces and mobility options, poses health risks. Housing conditions also have a direct effect on the physical and mental health of the population. Poor housing and indoor environments cause, or contribute to, many preventable diseases and injuries such as respiratory, nervous system and cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

4. The 2008 financial and economic crisis underscored the vital role that stable and transparent housing markets play in the economy. As a result of the crisis, some countries have experienced disturbing imbalances in their housing markets with foreclosures, homelessness, excess housing stock and a lack of affordable housing.

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5. Poor, disadvantaged and vulnerable populations[1] may lack affordable and adequate housing, face unhealthy and unsafe housing and physical barriers, and/or related discrimination and exclusion. Those living in substandard and informal settlements often lack water, sanitation and other public services.

6. In some cases urbanization has led to urban sprawl. This has had a negative impact on existing settlements and has reduced the land available for other uses. In other cases, urbanization has been uncontrolled, creating and expanding informal settlements, whose residents may lack security of tenure and social and physical infrastructure.

7. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and landslides, as well as human-generated disasters, have resulted in large-scale damage to housing across the ECE region and present serious challenges for governments and the region. National policies and planning are often inadequate to prevent and minimize damage from disasters and emergency situations. Affected populations should be provided with adequate temporary housing solutions, if necessary, through international and humanitarian assistance.

8. Climate change has become a tangible reality, with rising global temperatures, flooding, storms and landslides affecting people's lives and assets and causing economic and social losses. Houses and human settlements need to become resilient to extreme weather events, including those caused by climate change.

Chapter 2. Goal, Scope and Principles

9. The Charter is a non-legally binding document. The goal of the Charter is to support member States as they seek to ensure access to decent, adequate, affordable and healthy housing for all, with due attention to reducing the impact of the housing sector on the environment.

10. The scope of the Charter is to improve the sustainability of housing in the ECE region through effective policies and actions at all levels, supported by international cooperation, in order to contribute to sustainable development in the region.

11. The Charter contributes to the implementation of relevant Sustainable Development Goals on Cities and Human Settlements[2] and the implementation of the UN HABITAT Global Housing Strategy Framework[3].

12. When addressing the challenges outlined in Chapter 1, the following four principles and related rationales form the basis of sustainable housing:

(a) Environmental protection;

(b) Economic effectiveness;

(c) Social inclusion and participation;

(d) Cultural adequacy.

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[1] The definition of vulnerable groups and people varies from country to country and may include: young people; senior citizens; large families with children and single parent families; victims of domestic violence; people with disabilities including mental illness, intellectual and/or physical disabilities; immigrants; refugees; Roma communities; and other minority groups.

[2] Introduction to the proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals of 19 July 2014. At http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518outcomedocument.pdf

[3] See document HSP/GC/24/2/Add.6 and, for related decisions, http://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Decisions-and-resolution-GC-24th-session.pdf

(a) Environmental protection

13. Housing should be planned, constructed and used in a way that minimizes environmental impact and promotes environmental sustainability. This should be addressed through:

(i) Housing practices that contribute to reducing the carbon footprint of buildings throughout their life-cycle, from design, material supply, manufacturing, and construction, to use, maintenance, refurbishment, and demolition;

(ii) Improved environmental and energy performance of dwellings, which contribute to combating energy poverty, improving residents' quality of life and reducing health problems;

(iii) Resilient urban settlements which, when possible, use renewable energy, and proactively take into account climate change;

(iv) Existing houses that are retrofitted, as much as possible, for the efficient use of resources;

(v) Housing stock that is resilient to natural and human-generated hazards, enhanced through adequate planning, design and safe construction;

(vi) Green spaces around and within housing areas, including areas that provide habitat for wildlife, space for leisure, sport and urban agriculture;

(vii) Compact housing settlements with planned growth to prevent urban sprawl;

(viii) Housing settlements with priority given to sustainable and integrated transport systems and the provision of green infrastructure;

(ix) Encouragement of healthy living through: good housing design; maintenance; and retrofitting;

(x) Waste management treated as an integral part of sustainable housing strategies, including in housing construction, housing demolition and household living, with the encouragement of re-use, recycling, and composting.

(b) Economic effectiveness

14. Housing is, and has been, an influential sector in national economies. Housing should be both a sustainable element in a vibrant economy as well as a sector for meeting people's needs. This should be addressed through:

(i) Secure and neutral tenure (i.e. with flexibility between owning and renting);

(ii) Cadastral and land registration information and services that support an environment conducive to investment in housing and the promotion of secure land and housing tenure;

(ii) Transparent, efficient and effective accounting, regulatory procedures and mortgage rules in order to ensure appropriate mortgage availability, protect consumers, enhance their housing security, enlarge housing choices and reduce the risk of homes being lost;

(iv) Increased investment in sustainable housing promoted through private and public investments including public-private partnerships and other financing instruments;

(v) Housing construction and renovation as well as retrofitting of the existing housing stock in order to combat energy poverty by supporting energy efficiency (which will also contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation);

(vi) Housing construction performed based on the use of building codes and standards, which promote harmonization of common practices, procedures, products specifications to allow compatibility across state borders and support building safety;

(vii) The production of housing stock based, as much as possible, on local solutions, labour and local materials for their design, construction, refurbishment and maintenance, thus contributing to local employment;

(viii) The retrofitting of existing housing using appropriate technologies and in such a way as to generate employment;

(ix) Infrastructure and services to people in low income and informal settlements, when possible and appropriate;

(x) National policies and programmes that encourage, when possible and appropriate, dwellers of informal construction to regularize and upgrade their constructions provided that the geographic location and other factors allow minimum safety requirements to be met;

(xi) More integrated urban development and regeneration with workplaces and services brought into closer spatial relation to housing, while taking into account potential dangers and hazards;

(xii) Spatial planning that includes policies to: efficiently distribute economic activities; improve technical and social infrastructure and services; undertake urban regeneration; provide affordable housing; and address urban sprawl.

(c) Social inclusion and participation

15. Housing policy and debate should be advanced with an enhanced emphasis on engaged and negotiated civic involvement, social inclusiveness, public health, transparency, and a concern for ethical processes. This should be addressed through:

(i) Instruments of state support for adequate, healthy, safe and affordable housing, including access to basic utilities and services, which promote social cohesion and contribute to meeting the housing needs of various social groups, including marginalised and vulnerable groups and people[4];

(ii) Increased availability of housing options, particularly affordable and social housing, through different instruments, including through promoting tenure neutrality;

(iii) Planning, housing design, maintenance and retrofitting that: promotes healthy living; encourages the implementation of universal design principles in order to increase the usability of homes for all people across generational, gender and disability divides; and encourages socially mixed communities;

(iv) Support for adequate housing solutions for people affected by natural and human-made disasters;

(v) Housing and land tenure policies that support social justice;

[4] The definition of vulnerable groups and people varies from country to country and may include: young people; senior citizens; large families with children and single parent families; victims of domestic violence; people with disabilities including mental illness, intellectual and/or physical disabilities; immigrants; refugees; Roma communities; and other minority groups.

(vi) National housing policies developed through deliberative and democratic processes based on expert knowledge, extensive data collection, transparent reporting of statistics, and extensive and inclusive public debate about all aspects of housing development;

(vii) Research and exchange of knowledge on all aspects of sustainable housing;

(viii) Effective, clear, and transparent governance at all levels, including institutionalized procedures for appeals to decisions related to housing.

(d) Cultural adequacy

16. Housing policy should take into consideration questions of cultural identity, value, and emotional wellbeing. This should be addressed through:

(i) National housing policies that take into account social and territorial peculiarities and support the protection and enhancement of: landscapes; historical heritage; and cultural heritage;

(ii) Emphasizing the development of public spaces for cultural and social activities;

(iii) Housing that takes into consideration the background and culture of inhabitants;

(iv) Houses and neighbourhoods designed and actively maintained in order to enhance the emotional wellbeing of people, including by involving local communities in this process.

Chapter 3. Key directions of work and measures to promote sustainable housing

17. Member States have the intention to advance in the following four key directions towards sustainable housing:

(a) Limit the negative impact of housing on the environment and enhance the energy efficiency of the housing sector;

(b) Promote access to housing, in the context of sustainable economic development;

(c) Promote decent, adequate, healthy, barrier free and safe housing;

(d) Promote the continued application of sustainable housing principles.

18. Member States support the following actions:

(a) Limit the negative impact of housing on the environment and enhance the energy efficiency of the housing sector by taking measures to:

(i) Reduce the carbon footprint of the housing sector by reducing energy use throughout the entire life cycle of buildings, which includes: housing design; material supply and manufacturing; construction; maintenance; refurbishment; and demolition processes;

(ii) Decrease the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air and water quality, and waste management;

(iii) Apply building codes and standards for energy efficiency and the environmental safety of new and existing residential buildings;

(iv) Increase the proportion of low-energy housing units also as a part of an integrated urban renewal approach;

(v) Increase the use of low carbon and renewable energy technologies in housing;

(vi) Retrofit and renovate existing housing stock in an environmentally friendly, energy-efficient, affordable and cost-efficient way; making use of local solutions and knowledge when possible;

(vii) Put in place strategies to ensure that the design and construction of dwellings apply principles of environmental sustainability, with special regard to climate change mitigation and adaptation;

(viii) Adopt green housing policies and integrate them into sustainable urban and territorial development policies;

(ix) Make waste and water management an integral part of sustainable housing strategies and policies;

(x) Encourage construction of multifamily housing, promote integrated public transportation and facilitate the use of clean vehicles in order to, mainly, counteract urban sprawl and save energy;

(xi) Provide appropriate technical and financial support to housing stakeholders and, in particular, ensure the feasibility and affordability of energy efficiency measures, including for the most vulnerable parts of the population;

(xii) Promote and monitor integrated urban development and regeneration which brings workplaces and services into closer spatial relation to housing, while taking into account potential dangers and hazards; and increasing resilience to climate change;

(xiii) Provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for disadvantaged population groups[5].

(b) Promote access to housing in the context of sustainable economic development by taking measures to:

(i) Ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services;[6]

(ii) Promote secure tenure and the availability of housing options, including the neutral treatment of tenure options (such as ownership or renting), in order to encourage the development of adequate supplies of affordable housing;

(iii) Promote transparent and fair rental markets with a balance of rights and duties between landlords and tenants through adequate legislation and conflict resolution mechanisms in order to facilitate residential and labour mobility;

[5] Introduction to the proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals of 19 July 2013, at http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518outcomedocument.pdf

[6] Ibid

(iv) Contribute to well-functioning, efficient, equitable and transparent housing markets and land markets, which respond to different types of housing demand as well as favouring credit access for socially and economically vulnerable population groups, including through alternative forms of funding, such as housing microfinance;

(v) Develop and review policies and procedures for integrated urban renewal and housing maintenance, including utility systems and the encouragement of green investments in the sector;

(vi) Encourage effective management of the housing stock and develop mechanisms for affordable housing refurbishment;

(vii) Promote investment in sustainable housing through private and public investments, public-private partnership, and other means of financing;

(viii) Develop programmes, where appropriate, to assist those who are in danger of housing-loan default because of social or economic shocks and are threatened with homelessness;

(ix) Develop frameworks to ensure the rights and duties of all property owners as well as tenants;

(x) Where possible and appropriate, assist people living in informal and low-income settlements to have access to adequate infrastructure and services;

(xi) Promote national policies and programmes that encourage, when possible and appropriate, dwellers of informal construction to regularize and upgrade their constructions provided that the geographic location and other factors allow minimum safety requirements to be met;

(xii) Encourage the use of efficient solutions for the design, construction, refurbishment and maintenance of sustainable housing while respecting the cultural and geographic particularities of member States;

(xiii) Establish effective, clear and transparent regulations and procedures, as well as appropriate institutions for issuing building permits, with the objective of helping ensure fairness and non-discrimination and fighting corruption in the housing sector;

(xiv) Promote the use of spatial, cadastral and land registration information and services to create an environment conducive to investment in housing and the security of land and housing tenure;

(xv) Support cities and human settlements adopting and implementing smart city concepts, integrated policies and plans to support: inclusion, including socially mixed communities; resource efficiency; and resilience to climate change and disasters;[7]

(xvi) Promote integrated spatial planning which supports: the efficient spatial distribution of economic activities; the improvement of technical and social

[7] Introduction to the proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals of 19 July 2014. At http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518outcomedocument.pdf

infrastructure; urban regeneration and integrated urban renewal; and affordable housing and which also addresses urban sprawl.

(c) Promote decent, adequate, healthy, barrier free and safe housing by taking measures to:

(i) Improve access for all to good quality and healthy housing, reduce homelessness and improve access to barrier-free housing;

(ii) Develop socially mixed communities and avoid social segregation, gentrification and gated communities;

(iii) Encourage healthy living through housing design, maintenance and retrofitting as well as through public and green spaces around and within housing areas;

(iv) Improve the resilience of buildings to natural and human-generated hazards through safety planning, design and construction;

(v) Develop sustainable housing strategies that improve access to basic utilities and services, including safe drinking water and sanitation;

(vi) Promote the use of universal design principles in order to increase access to adequate housing and the ability to live independently for all;

(vii) Ensure that housing policy and legislation, and their implementation, are non-discriminatory.

(d) Promote the continued application of sustainable housing principles by taking measures to:

(i) Gather data on housing, including on homelessness, using common international standards to ensure data comparability between member States; make these data and national statistics publicly available in order to support policy-making, research and economic development; and make use of global and regional data repositories to support the policy-making process;

(ii) Encourage investment in research and innovation in all aspects of sustainable housing;

(iii) Support good governance at all levels, cooperation between relevant government agencies within countries, effective public participation in decision-making and the rule of law in housing;

(iv) Develop capacities for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management;

(v) Intensify the regional and international exchange of experience and cooperation in housing, urban planning and land management;

(vi) Develop and implement capacity-building programmes on housing, urban planning and land management issues for all stakeholders.